

Dangerous Liminalities, Constructed Criminalities:
A Comparative Analysis of Urban and Suburban/Rural Youth Violence Narratives

Adolescence has become a comic figure, serious yet trivialized, institutionally ordained and reduced to stereotypes, commodified and malleable as a sign of futures, pasts, fears, and hopes. So viewed, the adolescent is endearing, frightening, unavoidable, and exploitable. (Nancy Lesko, *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence*, 134)

Introduction: Youth, Race, and “Moral Panics”

Nancy Lesko’s *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* (2001) examines the framing of adolescent identity in the United States during the early 1900s in order to identify the ways in which “through the adolescent body, the fears and hopes of race, sexuality, gender, and empire could be visualized, openly desired, politically strategized, and measured” (Lesko 2001, 45). In her analysis, Lesko defines adolescence as both “a *technology* to produce certain kinds of persons within particular social arrangements” and a “border [zone] between the imagined end points of adult and child, male and female, sexual and asexual, rational and emotional, civil and savage, and productive and unproductive” (Lesko 2001, 50). In other words, Lesko identifies adolescence in the early 1900s as both a hegemonic tool wielded to construct particular kinds of citizens as well as a location embodied by youth that is framed through the political and social aims and agendas of adults. Importantly, she notes there is a “continuing significance of turn-of-the-century ideas” (Lesko 2001, 193) in aspects of contemporary youth experience such as violence in schools (Lesko 2001, 179). Indeed, Lesko notes that in the contemporary United States, “when teenagers take on forbidden adult behaviors, from having sex to breaking laws, they become monstrous” (Lesko 2001, 190).

According to both Lesko and Charles Acland, author of *Youth, Murder, Spectacle: The Cultural Politics of “Youth in Crisis,”* youths are on the cusp of adulthood and inhabit an in-between space where they have not yet been realized as adults or as citizens. Lesko’s argument

that youth are constructed as “becoming” during an “expectant time—a moratorium of responsibility and power” (Lesko 2001, 130), is a helpful framework for understanding representations of youth school violence across various popular culture mediums. Repeated fictional narrativizing of youthful liminality in relation to youth violence narratives¹ imply the struggle of adults to understand where youth belong in larger society. As Acland further explains, the identity of youth acts “not just a social category with particular forms of cultural expression and investment; it is also a conjunction point for various discourses with powerful implications for the forms and specificities of the popular at a given moment” (Acland 1995, 10). Acland continues in his description of the liminality of youth by describing young people as “‘before maturity,’ ‘before responsibility,’ ‘before concern,’ ‘before the real (adult and economically productive) world,’ where ‘before’ connotes the incomplete, the existence of potential, and the possibility of failure” (Acland 1995, 25). As both authors argue, youthful liminality allows for a flexibility in their construction depending on adult interests and agendas.

Moreover, Lesko claims that socially constructed narratives of adolescence engage adult audiences specifically through their messages about the future of society. As Lesko argues, “we consumers of adolescent narratives are bound emotionally to the story. We are happy, satisfied, and comforted by narratives of fulfillment (conventional adolescent development); we are

¹ I use the term “narrative” throughout this chapter to refer to the body of texts (including film and literature) that offer fictional representations of youth violence. Scholar Belinda Morrissey argues, “a distinction between experience and narration allows for the existence of the unnarrativizable. Not all experience, even of a single event, can be encompassed within any one discourse, and nor can all potential subjectivities” (Morrissey 2003, 10). I use the term narrative because it implies that choices must be made about *how* to narrate in order to achieve specific purposes, embed particular discourses, or highlight specific subjectivities. As well, the term “narrative” is broad enough to include the variety of structures that occur in the texts I will be analyzing. Because part of my larger argument is that “narrative structure changes how we perceive experience and can even affect what is perceivable” (Morrissey 2003, 10), I choose to draw attention to particular components of these texts, such as their structure and design, by referring to them as narratives.

disturbed and alarmed by precocity and risk” (Lesko 2001, 132). These narratives of adolescence, whether structured in mass media or in fictionalized portrayals such as novels, film, television, or other mediums, are forms of storytelling that “[make] ‘arguments’ about the nature of reality” and which “[function] as a powerful method of meaning making and a primary way of defining the world” (Barbatsis 2005, 332). As narrative theory scholar Gretchen Barbatsis argues, “because we make our way in the world by structuring our experiences into stories, narrative structures are deeply revealing of how we think, what we value, and why we act” (Barbatsis 2005, 345). For example, by following hegemonic narrative conventions of racism, patriarchy, and class hierarchy, portrayals of youth are able “to disassociate everyday Americans from the structural context of oppression and the historical context of struggle... by laying claim to the bodies and cultures of the ‘Other’” (Kim and Chung 2005, 73). In this way the actual identities and experiences of youth are redefined and re-presented through dominant ideologies.

Youth of color in the United States, specifically, are often constructed as particular kinds of (non) citizens through narratives of minority youth violence. Henry Giroux (1996) argues that portrayals of minority youth often “point to serious problems in the urban centers, but do so in ways that erase the accountability of the dominant culture and racist institutions, on the one hand, and any sense of viable hope, possibility, resistance, and struggle on the other” (Giroux 1996, 44-45). Urban education narratives that focus on youth violence, in particular, when compared with their suburban/rural youth violence narrative counterparts, communicate particular messages regarding who is a threat to democracy and who can be educated to be a harmless and productive citizen. Thus, Giroux argues that “the racial coding of representations of [minority] youth tells us less about such youth than it does about how white society configures

public memory, stability and disorder, and the experiences of marginal groups in America” (Giroux 1996, 69).

In youth narratives of violence, male perpetrators are frequently characterized in connection to their racial identities, resulting in racially disparate school violence narratives that frame youth of color as engaging in a “culture of violence” that is both inevitable and directly tied to their race and community, whereas white youth perpetrators are labeled as “evil” or as psychologically disturbed and are thus disconnected from their race and set apart from their communities. These representations have direct implications for the ways in which youth are both characterized as American citizens and denied citizenship based on their actions and the actions of those around them, as well as based on their racial identifications and community contexts. For example, the message communicated through a narrative in which a youth of color is incarcerated after a violent crime (see, for example, the film *Light It Up*) differs in significant ways from the message communicated through a narrative of a white youth who commits suicide after committing an act of violence (see, for example, the film *Heart of America*). Whereas the youth of color becomes a dependent of the state, the white youth, in a strange way, displays agency by removing himself from the community without police intervention. These fictional portrayals of youth provide evidence for scholar Julie Webber’s argument that it is “citizenship [that] becomes the dominant tactic for fighting a culture war against youth, ostensibly on their behalf” (Webber 2003, 37).

The community and national response to youth violence also differs depending on the race of the perpetrator and the location of the violent act. Because “the link between Blackness and criminality is routinized” whereas, “as a group, Whites have managed to escape being associated with crime” (Russel 1998, xiii; xiv), white crime and violence are perceived as

extraordinary and surprising. When crime occurs among white youth through violence, the innocence of youth and whiteness are both called into question, bringing about what Stanley Cohen has described as a “moral panic” (Cohen 2002). Cohen, in his text *Folk Devils and Moral Panic: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (2002; originally published in 1972), explains that moral panics are situations in which “a condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests,” and argues that these incidents are “presented in a stylized and stereotypical manner” (Cohen 2002, 1). Within moral panics, Cohen explains that there is a “gallery of folk types – heroes and saints, as well as fools, villains and devils [which is] publicized not just in oral-tradition and face-to-face contact but to much larger audiences and with much greater dramatic resources” (Cohen 2002, 8). The “folk devils” that are the title characters of Cohen’s analysis are elaborated by Stuart Hall, et al. as “the bearer of all our social anxieties” where we direct “the full wrath of our indignation” (Hall, et al. 1978, 161).

In his exploration of youth subcultures in Britain in the 1960s, Cohen postulates that mass media plays a central role in the shaping of moral panics. Indeed, Cohen notes the ways in which the mass media works to “create an awareness of what signs [will] signify [a] particular threat and what actions [are] called for” after an event has taken place (Cohen 2002, 62). Images, in particular, are especially significant in the development of a moral panic as they “are made much sharper than reality” through “symbolization, plus other types of exaggeration and distortion” (Cohen 2002, 30). As well, words that were once “neutral” – such as Columbine – “can be made to symbolize complex ideas and emotions” (Cohen 2002, 27). However, if the media have a specific role and purpose in sensationalizing crime and violence (see also, Gray 2004, Males 1999, Russell 1998, Wilson 2005), what then is the specific role and purpose of the

fictional narratives that also emerge in response to the moral panics concerning white youth violence? This is a central question that I will turn to in later in this chapter.

Stuart Hall, et al. build on Cohen's analysis in their study *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, originally published in 1978. Using the media and public responses to mugging events in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1970s, Hall, et al. argue that mugging "not only dominated the whole public discussion of crime and public disorder – it had become a central *symbol* for the many tensions and problems besetting American social and political life in general" (Hall et al. 1978, 19). The authors state that the event of "mugging" evolved into a moral panic precisely because of "its ability to *connote* a whole complex of social themes in which the 'crisis of American society' was reflected" (Hall, et al. 1978, 19). Indeed, Hall, et al. argue that mugging "connotes a whole historical construction about the nature and dilemmas of American society" (Hall, et al. 1978, 27). The public response to rampage shootings in suburban and rural schools has been treated in much the same way.

A paranoia grows out of rampage shootings, in part, because the potential victimhood that whites fear within urban areas has transitioned to white schools and suburban settings. These representations of white and minority youth have material consequences when, as bell hooks claims, "there is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images [and] representations of race" (hooks 1992a, 2). To offer reassurance to white audiences, narratives of youth violence that reference real-life violent acts must provide justifications and explanations for white violence that is framed as unexpected and shocking. Indeed, Hall et al. explain, "to give shocking and random events 'meaning' is to draw them once again into the framework of the rational order of 'things understood' – things that we can work on, do

something about, handle, manage” (Hall, et al.1978, 166). Thus, those who can reframe and explain rampage violence perpetrated by white youth hold the power of reclaiming the innocence of youth, whiteness, and, most importantly, white youth.

Similar to Hall, et al.’s study, I assume that school rampage shootings in the U.S. can also be categorized as “moral panics” because of the ways in which these shootings signify the anxieties of white suburbia and white supremacy in relation to citizenship rights. Specifically, threats to white masculinity and white male citizenship through urban “seepage,” questioning of the nuclear family and suburban parenting, and general concerns regarding American youth identity and youth sexuality are all aspects that come to light following events of suburban school mass violence (these aspects will be explored in later chapters). The media response to these shocking and unexpected cultural events both creates and maintains moral panics because of the challenges to the status quo that emerge when youth become “monstrous”.

In her article, “Why is Everybody Always Pickin’ on Youth? Moral Panics about Youth, Media, and Culture,” Sharon Mazzarella characterizes moral panics that center on youth culture as exhibiting characteristics such as “adults’ fear of losing control over ‘vulnerable’ youth” and “the need to find a simple solution to a complex problem involving youth (whether real or perceived)” (Mazzarella 2007, 49). These characteristics of moral panic can be applied to the cultural reaction to both urban and suburban/rural youth violence. However, while urban violence is assumed to be endemic and can thus only be eradicated through incarceration, the importance of *explaining away* white youth violence is central to the moral panic that occurs in response to rampage school violence. While representations of urban youth in schools frequently focus on spectacles of violence, teen pregnancy, and other stereotypical teenage concerns in order to highlight an amazing transformation that is brought about by white teachers, these

spectacles have a vastly different purpose when included in narratives that center on the experiences of white students.

To begin to locate similarities and differences between these racially segregated sub-genres of education narratives that focus on youth violence, in the remainder of this chapter I offer a short literature of the scholarship surrounding popular culture representations of minority youth in urban settings in order to contextualize white youth school violence narratives within already present narratives of youth violence. Following this discussion, I propose a taxonomy of urban and suburban/rural education representations to illustrate how and why youth violence narratives repeatedly communicate hegemonic ideologies of race, gender, and violence. I conclude the chapter with an application of this taxonomy that places two representative film narratives, the urban school violence film, *187* (1997), and the suburban/rural school violence film *Elephant* (2003), in conversation with one another through an analysis of the films themselves in addition to an exploration of the film's reviews and reception.

Urban Education Narratives and the "Realities" of Youth Violence

In his detailed text, *Framing Youth: 10 Myths about the Next Generation*, Mike Males discusses the misrepresentation of youth violence in the media. According to Males, who uses statistics from California as a case study, during the 30-year period between 1976 and 1996, felony arrest rates consistently increased for white adults (over age 30) and simultaneously decreased for minority youth. In California, between 1990 and 1997, minority youth felony arrest rates fell 28 percent, while white adult felony arrests increased 21 percent (Males 1999, 6). Males argues that this is one example of the ways in which American youth are described by the media in ways that distract from the reality of their situation. Framed as "harbingers of the multi-racial failure" (Males 1999, 8), a representation that results from adult American's "racial

and ethnic discomfort” with an increasingly minority citizen population (Males 1999, 9), minority youth are portrayed as criminals, even as crime and arrest rates rise for white adults. As Males points out, “it is no accident that political authorities, scholars, and the media now ascribe to adolescents the same prejudices once hurled at nonwhites – violence, hypersexed, irrational, volatile, dangerous” (Males 1999, 9). The status of white adults as rational and innocent must be defended; even when the statistics cannot provide the evidence needed to blame minority youths for rising crime rates, claims can still be made and believed based on racial stereotypes and social hegemonies that construct whites as ideal citizens.

Since 1993, national homicide rates among youth have been steadily decreasing (CDC 2009, np). Juvenile arrest rates for homicide fell from 3,284 in 1993 to 1,011 in 2007, a significant difference. This decrease in youth violence is also mirrored in the decline of the rate of homicides that occur on school grounds in the United States. Whereas in the 1992-1993 school year there were 42 deaths, in 2007 there were 11. Only one death on school grounds was reported in 2008 (University of Virginia 2009, np). Despite these decreasing numbers of national homicides perpetrated by youth and committed against youth on school grounds, popular culture portrayals of youth violence in schools have increased exponentially. Interestingly, previous to the year 2000, the majority of school violence novels, films, and television representations featured youth of color in narratives that focused on gang violence and encouraged the pursuit of education to escape dangerous neighborhoods (see Table 1).

Urban School Violence Narratives

	Title	Year	Medium
1	<i>Blackboard Jungle</i>	1955	Film
2	<i>The Principal</i>	1987	Film
3	<i>Stand and Deliver</i>	1988	Film
4	<i>Lean on Me</i>	1989	Film
5	<i>Boyz in the Hood</i>	1991	Film
6	<i>Zebrahead</i>	1992	Film
7	<i>My Posse Don't Do</i>	1993	Memoir

	<i>Homework</i>		
8	<i>Dangerous Minds</i>	1995	Film
9	<i>"The Gun" Family Matters</i>	1995	Television Episode
10	<i>The Substitute</i>	1996	Film
11	<i>Girls Town</i>	1996	Film
12	<i>"Dangerous Minds"</i>	1996-1997	Television Series
13	<i>187</i>	1997	Film
14	<i>The Freedom Writers Diary</i>	1999	Memoir
15	<i>Light It Up</i>	2000	Film
16	<i>Snitch'd</i>	2002	Film
17	<i>In the Deep Heart's Core</i>	2002	Memoir
18	<i>Freedom Writers</i>	2005	Film
19	<i>"Extraction" The Shield</i>	2006	Television Episode

Table 1

Post-2000, however, there has been a rise in rampage shooting representations with numerous novels, television episodes, films, and young adult novels portraying white males shooting classmates and teachers in suburban and rural areas.² These post-2000 representations continue through the present with the most recent 2009 film *April Showers*, written and directed by Andrew Robinson, a survivor of the Columbine High School Massacre (see Table 2). A comparison of these two tables illustrates the chronological shift from urban narratives of youth violence to suburban/rural narratives that occurs around the year 2000. Of the 19 urban youth violence narratives, 14 (or 74%) take place prior to the year 2000. Comparatively, of the 21 suburban/rural youth violence narratives, 18 (or 86%) take place post-2000.

Suburban Rural School Violence Narratives

	Title	Year	Medium
A	<i>Rage</i>	1985	Novel
B	<i>Duck! The Carbine High Massacre</i>	1999	Film

² Kimmel and Mahler (2003) have made a similar chronological distinction between actual urban and suburban/rural acts of violence. The authors locate "two different waves of school violence since 1980. In the first, from 1982-1991, the majority of all school shootings were nonrandom... most were in urban, inner-city schools and involved students of color" and in the second, since 1992, 22 out of 23 school shootings "have been committed by White students in suburban schools" (Kimmel and Mahler 2003, 1442-1443). The timeline of these actual incidents of school violence and the shift that occurs in the early 1990s is parallel to a shift that is present in representations of school violence about ten years later.

C	<i>"Earshot" Buffy the Vampire Slayer</i>	1999	Television Episode
D	<i>The Third Victim</i>	2001	Novel
E	<i>"Chapter Nine" Boston Public</i>	2001	Television Episode
F	<i>"School Daze" Law & Order</i>	2001	Television Episode
G	<i>The Healer</i>	2002	Novel
H	<i>Heart of America</i>	2002	Film
I	<i>Home Room</i>	2002	Film
J	<i>"Minute By Minute" Touched by an Angel</i>	2002	Television Episode
K	<i>Bang Bang, You're Dead</i>	2003	Film (based on a play)
L	<i>Zero Day</i>	2003	Film
M	<i>Elephant</i>	2003	Film
N	<i>We Need to Talk About Kevin</i>	2003	Novel
O	<i>To the Power of Three</i>	2005	Novel
P	<i>"Dark Matter" Numb3rs</i>	2006	Television Episode
Q	<i>"With Tired Eyes, Tired Minds, Tired Souls, We Slept" One Tree Hill</i>	2006	Television Episode
R	<i>The Hour I First Believed</i>	2008	Novel
S	<i>Nineteen Minutes</i>	2008	Novel
T	<i>The Life Before Her Eyes</i>	2008	Film
U	<i>April Showers</i>	2009	Film

Table 2

Scholars who engage in cultural studies of youth and feminist studies (see, for example, hooks 1992b, Hall 1997) attest to the powerful role of stereotypes in the representation of difference in popular culture. bell hooks argues that "stereotypes abound when there is distance" (hooks 1992b, 341) and Stuart Hall claims that "stereotyping tends to occur when there are gross inequalities of power" (Hall 1997, 258). In other words, these scholars note the ways in which stereotypes are born out of hegemonic social relations and become tools to maintain these relations when they are utilized against groups of people who have been identified as "other". Stereotypical representations of minority youth, in particular, encourage further segregation and inequality within society through playing on cultural fears and anxieties of urban criminality and violence. When minority youth are perceived to be a threat to white safety and suburban security, stereotypes are deployed in order to provide justification for oppressive practices. As Hall argues, a strong stereotype, communicated across popular culture mediums, shapes social

relationships as it “engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties” (Hall 1997, 226).

Portrayals of urban youth are often rife with stereotypes that draw on myths of urban life, crime, and poverty. Black and Latino/a youth are shown as having hopeless futures without white intervention.³ Addicted to drugs, engaging in sexual activity that results in “children raising children,” and unable to excel in school, these youths are always represented as deviant when compared with their white counterparts. Unlike instances of white youth deviance, which can be explained away through discourses of masculinity (“boys will be boys”), individualized mistakes that can be corrected (“she learned her lesson; it won’t happen again”), or outside influences (rap music, violent films, video games, etc.), minority youth deviance is situated within “pathologizing discourses” in which deviant youth are not seen as individuals, but rather “stand in for or symbolize a whole host of social ills or problems” (Dimitriadis 2008, 32) as a group.

The stories that are told about minority youth in urban settings rely on a “code of the real” that “works to create notions of ‘the inner city’ as distinct from suburban ones – locating in the former a whole host of problems seen as endemic to these centers and their inhabitants” (Dimitriadis 2008, 11). Thus, when deviance occurs in white, suburban/rural settings, it becomes the unreal and shocks the community who is at the center of the event. bell hooks explains this inconsistency when she argues that “one fantasy of whiteness is that the threatening Other is always a terrorist. This projection enables many white people to imagine there is no representation of whiteness as terror, as terrorizing” (hooks 1992b, 344). Whereas representations of minority youth violence in popular culture and media portrayals work to

³ See, for example, white savior figures in *Dangerous Minds* (1995), *Light It Up* (2000), *Freedom Writers* (2005), and other narratives of urban youth violence.

maintain stereotypes and misrepresentations of racial identities, fictional white youth violence narratives must do the opposite by disconnecting rampage violence from white racial identity.

Urban education narratives⁴ are often presented as if in a vacuum, yet are embedded with “the inflated presence of the suburban priorities and anxieties in the popular imagination and in political life” (McCarthy, et al. 1998, 219). Portrayals of urban education focus on spectacles of urban violence in such a way that “the discourse of race and violence provides a sense of social distance and moral privilege that places dominant white society outside of the web of violence and social responsibility” (Giroux 1996, 56). For example, the urban education film *Freedom Writers* (2005) begins with a series of scenes of urban violence. Starting with news footage of the “war zone” of Los Angeles in 1992, images of looting and police in riot gear introduce the film about minority youth. Following these historic scenes of the aftermath of the Rodney King trial, the film then portrays the contemporary neighborhood in which the film is set. A culture of violence is introduced through scenes in which children are taught to box, a drive-by shooting occurs, youth are initiated into gangs through group beatings, gang shootings establish turf understandings between racial groups, and “you could get blasted any time you walk out your door.” Violence is both plentiful and completely normal to the youth in the film’s white, female protagonist, Ms. Grewell’s, freshman English class, who use journaling as a strategy of processing the violence around them. Importantly, this violence is explicitly tied to the youth’s criminality, indicated by their required ankle bracelets and probation officers. During the first

⁴ I use the term “urban education narrative” to encompass a broad genre of films and literature that take place in urban and inner-city settings. These narratives, according to scholars such as Beyerbach (2005) and Giroux (2008), often include underdog minority students, inspirational teachers, and tensions surrounding issues of race, class and community identity. It is not uncommon for these films to fit into the subgenre that has been described by Amy Wells and Todd Serman (1998) as the “great white hope phenomenon” in which “the heroic teachers are white and most of the students are African American or Latino” (Wells and Serman 1998, 186).

week of Ms. Grewell's teaching experience, a riot breaks out on school property and students, both male and female, are shown engaging in hand-to-hand combat with one another. This fighting also enters the classroom, where Ms. Grewell must call on security officers to break up fights among her students.

The representation of this culture of violence is reinforced through students' journal entries, which focus on domestic violence, stories of children with guns resulting in accidental death, gang violence and drive-by shootings, "war" on the streets, and dating violence. Indeed, almost all of the students' journal entries that are highlighted in the film focus on their experiences with violence at home, at school, or on the street. Even the students' ability to engage with their schoolwork is mediated through their experience with everyday violence. Ms. Grewell's class becomes interested in their curriculum for the first time upon reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* because they identify with the memoirist's struggle against systemic violence. Through these repeated illustrations of a culture of violence, *Freedom Writers* is a clear example of "the popular perception that everyday black urban life and violence crime mutually define each other" (Giroux 1996, 56).⁵

The representations of urban violence found in films such as *Freedom Writers* play on audiences' perceptions of minority youth that have already been shaped by media images of racial criminality. As Acland argues, although youth are "increasingly symbolically central as that internal Other defined as a threat to the stability of the social order" the identity of a threat is

⁵ As I mentioned in the introductory chapter (pgs. 2-3), black racial identity often acts as the broad categorization for "urban youth" that also includes other racial identities such as Latino, Puerto Rican, and Mexican youths, among others. I would argue that Giroux's argument about "urban life and violent crime" can be expanded beyond representations of blackness to include other portrayals of minority youths in films about urban education such as *Freedom Writers*, which include black students as well as other racial minorities being stereotyped as violent criminals.

“doubly true for African American and Hispanic American youth” (Acland 1995, 41). The violence portrayed in urban youth narratives such as *Freedom Writers* mirrors the minority violence represented in the news media which “generally becomes sensational in terms of scale... individual acts of violence are deemphasized in favor of the scope and prevalence of [minority] crime” as a whole (Acland 1995, 48). With a backdrop of stylized minority violence, racialized messages of success in urban school violence films are presented in which whiteness alone becomes “the archetype of rationality, authority, and cultural standards” (Giroux 1997, 46). This archetype of whiteness is especially evident in *Freedom Writers* when shots of Ms. Grewell’s English class of primarily minority students are compared with shots of the Honors English class where a white male teaches primarily white students.

Taxonomy of Suburban/Rural and Urban School Violence Film and Literature Narratives

Freedom Writers offers a strong example of the kinds of themes, dominant ideologies, and narrative elements that are embedded within cinematic representations of urban youth school violence. It is important to note, however, that these aspects of urban youth violence narratives can be identified across cultural mediums such as novels, television, and memoir, in addition to the popular “urban education film” genre of the 1990s. Scholars have noted the ways in which these representations of urban youth have created a wide-spread discourse of “primitiveness” that portrays urban youth in popular culture as “[different] from the life of a normal society” (Wilson 2005, 56; 125). Indeed, scholar Cameron McCarthy argues that “inner-city black school youth are surrounded by this powerful discourse of crime and violence in which they are the constructed other – social objects who grapple with the reality code projected from the popular media culture” (McCarthy 1998, 101). Thus, the moral panic that results from rampage violence in white, suburban and rural areas can find its foundation in the cultural and political anxiety

surrounding perceptions of urban juvenile crime in the 1980s and 1990s (Gray 2004; Russell 1998; Wilson 2005).⁶

The specific representations of suburban/rural youth violence that are foundational to the following chapters are significant for two main reasons. First, the fictionalizing of historical events creates a space for interpretation by both authors and audiences. As Janet Staiger states, “anything other than a virtual copy of the real event must emphasize certain aspects of the events and neglect others, and thus produce both drama and a point of view” (Staiger 1996, 41). The creation of national and social dramas through popular representations can influence power relations. As anthropologist Victor Turner argues, these representations are not concerned with “present[ing] a seemingly objective reality of certain events,” but are focused instead on “giv[ing] subtle expression to divergent interests or switches in the balance of power” (Turner 1985, 121). By representing spectacularized youth violence based on the “real” through fictional narratives, authors can influence national understandings of youth identity and citizenship in significant ways.

Second, representations based on real events blur the lines between fact and fiction to the point where audience interpretation of reality can be influenced by representation. In her article, “Cinematic Shots: Narratives of Violence,” Staiger argues that “the distance between the representation and the real has become such a widely available and misunderstood notion that it is possible for people to doubt accounts of events” (Staiger 1996, 52). This point is especially relevant to school shooting narratives that emphasize psychiatric, conspiracy, and other explanatory discourses to rationalize white, male youth violence. As cultural studies scholars argue, “because reality has been redefined by and through media cultures, it is increasingly

⁶ It should be noted that black youth responded to these perceptions with their own self-representations, particularly through music (Gray 2004, 36).

difficult to separate what happens in the realm of the popular from what happens in schools” (McCarthy and Dimitraidis 2005, 325). In response to this concern, I question the ways in which fictional narratives offer an easy way out for spectators through these portrayals as they simultaneously disrupt the potential for critical analysis.

Based on a review of 21 suburban/rural school violence fictional narratives from 1985 to 2009 (Table 2) and 18 urban violence fictional narratives from 1955 to 2006 (Table 1) including films, novels, memoirs, and television episodes,⁷ I developed the following taxonomy as a tool to categorize youth violence narratives and attempt to understand these narrative sub-genres as historically, politically, and socially embedded (Table 3). The taxonomy is divided into four categories: shooter identity (including the shooter’s race and gender, assumptions about the shooter’s sexuality, and the shooter’s relationship with their peer group or broader community), the form of violence used (including whether the violence was enacted against one or many, the weapon used, and the cause of or rationale for the violence), the aftermath of the violence (including community and national response, where blame for the violence is placed, the results of the violence, and the consequences for the perpetrator), and narrative elements (including the genre of the narrative, who is represented as the hero or savior, and the source of hope for the community that is experiencing the youth violence). These categories were identified through a

⁷ These narratives were chosen for analysis through both film and book reviews and online searches using tools such as the Internet Movie Database (IMDB). It is significant to note that identifying suburban/rural violence narratives is distinctly different than the identification of urban violence narratives. Because urban violence narratives often focus on a “culture of violence,” the youth violence in these narratives is frequently embedded and interwoven as an assumption, rather than as a central focus or individual incident. Suburban/rural youth violence is disruptive, not assumed, and therefore these narratives are defined through youth violence instead of using it as a backdrop. Whereas urban youth violence narratives may not be described as such in reviews and summaries, suburban/rural youth violence narratives are always discussed with the violence being identified as a central component. Thus, at times, specific narratives of rampage violence were easier to identify and locate than their urban violence counterparts.

review of common themes within the narratives and also include common narrative and plot elements. Included in the taxonomy are examples that represent each category (referenced from Table 1 and Table 2 above).⁸

Taxonomy of Youth Violence Narratives

	Suburban/Rural	Examples	Urban	Examples
Perpetrator/Shooter Identity	Primarily White Males	A, B, C, D, H, I, L, M, Q, R, S, T, U	Primarily Black/Latino or Other Minority Males	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 14, 15, 18, 19
Perpetrator/Shooter Sexuality	Implied gay or alternative sexuality	M, N, S	Hyper-masculinity	1, 5, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19
Shooter Community Identity	Goth subculture or other alternative affiliation, alienated from popular groups	H, I, N, Q, R, S	Gang affiliation, often popular with other youths	1, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19
Weapon	Guns and Bombs	B, C, D, G, H, I, J, K, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U	Guns or Knives	1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19
Form of Violence	Rampage shooting	B, D, H, I, K, L, M, N, P, R, S, T, U	One-to-one violence, group violence (riots)	1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 18, 19, [O]
Cause	Mental Illness, Bullying, Conspiracy	C, H, M, R, S	Culture of Violence, Criminality, Frustration with Authority	1, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19
Result of/Response to	National attention	N, R, U	Local attention, if	1, 13, 14, 15,

⁸ Although this taxonomy offers a strong categorization for suburban/rural and urban violence narratives, there are exceptions to some of the categories that can help further our understanding of why contemporary representations of youth violence are constructed in particular ways. One of these exceptions is Laura Lippman's mystery novel, *To the Power of Three* (2005), in which a female shooter commits one-to-one violence against another girl in a school bathroom. This novel, and other narratives that do not quite fit the taxonomy, point to additional questions regarding how the real-life narratives of suburban/rural violence are used to communicate particular understandings of American youth. The use of rampage violence frameworks – seen in Lippman's narrative through the story of a gun brought to school, fearful students locked in a bathroom, and the mystery of why the violence occurred – play on audience's already present experience of suburban school violence. The narratives that refuse to be categorized within certain aspects of this taxonomy offer helpful insights when placed in dialogue with the other narratives in this study because they point to the flexibility and malleability of youth violence narratives, as well as how these narratives have shifted over time to include components that differ from the real-life events (such as the female shooter seen in Lippman's text).

Violence			any attention	19
Blame for Violence	Parents, popular culture, availability of guns	I, K, M, P, R, S	Community, culture of violence, poverty	1, 5, 7, 8, 13, 14, 18, 19
Consequence for Perpetrator	Imprisonment, death by suicide	H, M, N, Q, R, S, T, U, [13]	Imprisonment, none	1, 6, 8, 11, 15, 18, 19
Narrative Genre	Mystery, black comedy, family drama, memoir, based on a true story	B, D, J, N, O, Q, R, S	Urban education narrative, drama, memoir, based on a true story	All of Table 1
Hero/Savior	White male or female youth, law enforcement	C, D, I, Q, S, U	White male or female adult	1, 7, 8, 12, 14, 15, 18, 19
Source of Hope	Pregnancy or loss of pregnancy, youth romance, generosity/sacrifice of humanity, youth friendship, youth innocence, Christianity = universal or community themes	G, H, I, J, Q, R, S, T, U	Escape from community or school, higher education, getting out, survival or neighborhood = local or individual themes	3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19

Table 3

This taxonomy of youth violence narratives was developed as a tool for categorizing themes that appear in narratives across genres and modes of popular culture. In order to illustrate the prominence of these themes, this taxonomy offers categories that appear in both urban and suburban/rural youth violence narratives, but also points to the shifts that occur in each category. Some of these themes, such as gender identity and sexuality, will be further explored in future chapters. Other themes, such as the identity of “hero/savior” characters and tropes that offer a “source of hope” will be interwoven into later analyses of how suburban/rural youth violence narratives represent embedded anxieties concerning youth identity and citizenship. Below, I offer a more detailed examination of the four main categories described above that encompass the 12 themes that make up the taxonomy, offering examples of each in order to illustrate the application of the taxonomy across genre and diverse narrative modes. Following this examination, I apply the taxonomy to two representative films in a comparative analysis.

Shooter Identity

Like the actual rampage school shootings that have occurred across the United States, suburban/rural school violence narratives feature primarily white, male shooters. In many ways, this racial segregation serves to produce broader messages regarding the relationship between children/adolescents and their communities. Because rampage violence is often represented as abnormal and urban violence is normalized in minority communities through media stereotypes and popular culture portrays of minority youths frequently engaged in crime and violence, the divergent forms of violence threaten their communities in drastically different ways. As Henry Giroux states, “violence is not absent from representations of white youth and adults, but it is rarely depicted so as to suggest that aggression and violence represent an inherent quality of what it means to be white” (Giroux 1996, 68). Rampage violence is often shocking and unexpected, pulling apart a community in an instant, whereas urban one-to-one violence is represented as having a smaller, more localized impact that is removed from larger society. Rather than illustrating a culture of violence, white youth violence “is framed almost exclusively through the language of individual pathology, political extremism, or class specific nihilism” (Giroux 1996, 68).

April Showers (2009), the most recent suburban school violence film to be released, uses the situation of a rampage shooting for broad political purposes, illustrating the ways in which suburban/rural violence attracts media attention at a national scale and has far-reaching ripple-effects. Rather than focus on white male shooters, the film instead examines the exploitation of youth victims by the media that occurs during the aftermath of rampage violence. Thus, the white youth in *April Showers* are primarily categorized as victims rather than perpetrators of violence. As the film follows a white male drama student as he comes to terms with the death of

a white female student at the hands of a white male rampage shooter for whom he had romantic feelings, *April Showers* becomes a study of individualized grief rather than an exploration of white youth violence. The race of the shooters and the victims is both unmarked and unexamined.

This portrayal is distinctly different from the culture of minority violence represented in the fifth season episode of *The Shield*, “Extraction,” in which the police respond to a high school race riot caused by gang violence where a student has been killed by gunfire. During this event, the police choose to turn a fire hose on fighting students in order to break them up, emphasizing the racial component of the violence by re-presenting a civil rights image of brutality. When a black mother in the community questions this choice of police response, a Latino police administrator defends the use of the fire hose and claims that the brutal act is warranted because of the students’ extreme violence. These representations of urban youth through portrayals of rioting, murder and gang violence have a lasting effect on audiences. As Charles Acland argues, “even as the initial crime is being left far behind, a general crisis of youth is being established” (Acland 1995, 14) and inner-city schools are represented as beyond hope. Minority youth violence is perceived as a “cancer” (Lebrun 2009, 2) that ravages the inner city leaving “a holy shrine to dead black and brown bodies” (McCarthy, et al. 2005, 214).

In addition to positing a “crisis of youth,” youth violence portrayals often include a “crisis of masculinity” that must be rectified through violence. As Julie Webber argues, “when men stockpile weapons, it is to increase their sense of power when they *lack* it in comparison to other men” (Webber 2003, 36). Indeed, a relationship between weapons and masculinity is frequently illustrated in both urban and suburban/rural violence narratives, which often focus on male protagonists, but in distinctly different ways. *187* (1997), starring Samuel L. Jackson, is

one example of an urban violence narrative that begins when an angry student of color stabs his teacher (Jackson) repeatedly on school property. This act, although situated within a community where violence is considered a norm, is also framed as an isolated incident that is one student's reaction to a failing grade. The catalyst for violence in urban education narratives is often a personal affront that brings about the need for one-to-one vengeance or reckoning; these violence responses frequently include acts of hyper-masculinity, performances of machismo, as well as justifications based on the need to protect women within the community. Suburban/rural violence narratives, on the other hand, find white, male youths responding against a school community as a whole in order to defend their masculinity when it is questioned or to illustrate their normative sexuality.

Heart of America, a 2002 film chronicling the events leading up to a school shooting planned by a white male, is explained through a narrative of the perpetrator's experience of bullying by classmates. Despite specific "enemies" noted in the film through particular scenes of humiliation and violence, the shooter engages in a rampage shooting that kills these bullies as well as other "innocent" bystanders. The rationale of bullying is a repeated trope in suburban/rural school violence narratives that is not present in urban school violence portrayals. Scrawny white adolescents are often described as being harassed by male peers who are violent toward them and who question their sexuality. Julie Webber, in her book *Failure to Hold: Politics of School Violence*, notes that the label "faggot," in particular, becomes a "'trigger' word" for rampage violence, thus demonstrating "very clearly the problems not yet dealt with concerning masculinity and homophobia, homoeroticism, and sexism faced by girls and boys in school" (Webber 2003, 80).

The phenomenon of gay male shooters, or shooters who are rumored to be gay, is another frequent trope of rampage shooting narratives that is not found within urban youth violence narratives. Often further illustrating the shooters deviance from his or her peers, the relationship that is drawn between violence and sexuality also plays on historical framings of serial killers as sexually disturbed. One of the most obvious representations of this phenomenon is the character “Buffalo Bill” in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) who is portrayed as a cross-dressing killer who hopes to make himself a woman suit out of the skins of his victims. This over-the-top portrayal draws a direct connection between the killer’s actions and his sexual identity. Similarly, rampage violence narratives such as Lionel Shriver’s novel *We Need To Talk About Kevin* also frame violent male youth protagonists through their sexuality. The character of Eva, for example, describes her son, Kevin, who is currently incarcerated for killing his classmates, as wearing clothes that are too small and which emphasize his “aggressive sexuality” (Shriver 2003, 170-171). Kevin is also described as having “traces of effeminacy” that encourage a gender “ambiguity” that he enjoys (Shriver 2003, 171). This relationship between rampage violence and sexuality will be further explored in Chapter Three.

Form of Violence

One of the most obvious divergences of suburban/rural violence narratives from those set in urban areas are the forms of violence themselves. Rather than focus on a central narrative of one-on-one violence or rioting, often tied to gang affiliation or other forms of criminality, suburban/rural narratives are created around rampage shooting scenarios in which one or more youths target those in their school or community indiscriminately. Using guns or bombs, these perpetrators differ from their urban narrative counterparts who usually aim to kill one instead of many when they target large groups of students and teachers and are portrayed as shooting into

crowds of students in locations such as libraries or school cafeterias. Even as both suburban/rural and urban youth violence narratives focus on violent protagonists that have been “wronged” by someone or something around them, the rationale for their violence is another strong divergence between the narratives.

In urban school violence narratives, it is not uncommon to see youth acting out against one another through hand-to-hand violence or by using weapons that happen to be in the area. The gang fighting in *Dangerous Minds* and *Freedom Writers*, for instance, is often enacted through fistfights that occur on the street. These frequent fights portray the ways in which minority youth violence is so out of control that it can erupt anytime in any location. Portrayals of rioting, such as the incident in *The Shield* or the opening scene of *Freedom Writers*, further illustrate the ways in which minority communities must be managed by white authorities when they cannot control their violent actions. That real-life riots are frequently explained by the media through racial stereotypes of violence and crime makes them all the more familiar to narrative audiences.

Because minority youth violence is often represented as out of control and spur-of-the moment, the careful planning and scheming that is described in suburban/rural violence narratives sets white youth violence apart in significant ways. White youth protagonists are represented as having agency, intelligence, and control when they incorporate long-term planning into their violent acts. In *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, for example, the male protagonist engages in a plan that lasts several days in order to bring a select group of students into a locked room so that he can kill them. This kind of planning is also evident in several other rampage shooting narratives that involve more than one killer. The protagonists in these narratives are also reacting against long-term brutalities such as bullying or are acting on urges

brought about by a developing mental illness. Narratives of suburban/rural violence that include scenes of a killer planning his violence emphasize the agency, intelligence, and pre-meditation of the white youth who must take reasoned actions to perpetrate his crime.

The messages in these racially segregated portrayals of violence are varied. By focusing on particular causes of violence (gangs, bullies, mental illness, etc.) the authors of these narratives present particular reasonings for their characters' actions and thus justify the kinds of responses that occur after violent acts are committed. The one-to-one and riot violence portrayed in urban settings is represented as much more prevalent than rampage shootings, despite the concern of an "epidemic" of white, male violence. Thus, the impact of rampage shootings on individual victims and communities is all the more brutal because of the isolated nature of the events. Quick and severe responses are warranted for violence that has the potential of being prevented. Urban violence, however, when understood as a "norm" of minority communities, is not as preventable when it is a common and familiar occurrence.

Aftermath

The narratives in this study represent a varying forms of local and national response depending on the kind of violence portrayed and the racial dynamics of the communities within each narrative. Whereas suburban/rural youth violence causes a national reaction and is often followed by a media spectacle, urban youth violence narratives frequently receive only local, if any, response. While some urban violence narratives portray a broader media spectacle in response to youth violence, these media events result in no significant change in education policy or community experiences of youth violence. The 1999 film, *Light It Up*, for example, illustrates the media response that occurs when minority students take a police officer hostage in their high school. Demanding that the community fix various problems in the school (broken windows,

missing textbooks, college-ready programs for students, etc.), the minority youth capture the attention of local media who surround the school with television cameras and microphones. However, when the hostage situation results in the death of a student, the overall message of the film is the hopelessness of minority youth agency. The end of the film shows no lasting changes to the school when several of the youth are incarcerated.

Suburban/rural school violence narratives, on the other hand, make political claims about the ways in which students involved in actual events of rampage shootings are often targeted and exploited by the media with lasting effects. This theme is present in *April Showers* (2009) when one character who is pursued by media outlets for his role in saving a fellow classmate commits suicide. Other representations illustrate the changes made to school property through removing areas of the school where violence occurred,⁹ adding metal detectors to increase student safety and installing permanent memorials for remembering victims of violence. Narratives such as the film *The Life Before Her Eyes* and Wally Lamb's novel *The Hour I First Believed* focus on the long-term aftermath of suburban/rural school violence years after the event has taken place through portraying class reunion or memorial events and the extended trauma experienced by the victims.

The reaction of the community toward the perpetrator of the violence is also distinctly different in urban versus suburban/rural narratives. Whereas white youths are alienated from their communities and peers, experiencing vandalism to their homes or death threats, urban youths can be further accepted by some members of their communities and various social groups for incidents of violence. This is the case, for example, in both *Freedom Writers* and *The Shield*

⁹ This act of “removing” parts of the school is similar to actual responses to rampage violence when communities redesign school environments after violence has occurred. For example, the library of Columbine High School was “removed” when the school was renovated after the shooting took place.

when youths become gang members after participating in acts of violence. The clear message in suburban/rural youth violence narratives is that deviant youths do not represent the white communities in which they commit their violence acts. In many ways, however, the opposite is true in urban violence narratives that focus on stereotypes of minority violence and crime as signifying the larger community identity.

Blame for the violent acts in suburban/rural and urban narratives often depends on elements of the shooter's identity as well as their relationship to the larger community. For example, in narratives where suburban/rural youth are considered "deviant" based on their clothing choices, music, or extracurricular activities, parents are often blamed for their child's actions and are brought up on charges themselves (such as in Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* in which a parent faces civil charges for her son's crimes). This deviance is not present in urban violence narratives because youth often commit violence acts with the support of those around them when they are part of a gang family or a riot situation. It is important to note that the violence enacted in suburban/rural narratives is considered to be an element that is outside of the community forcing its way in, whereas violence in urban settings is considered to have its origins within families and groups of youth within the community.

This understanding of the origin of violence as internal or external impacts how the narratives frame the results of the violence and the consequences for the perpetrator(s). In the case of urban narratives, the violence is just expected to continue, as is the case in *187* where a white female teacher throws away her teaching certificate and gives up on the minority youth in her school. In suburban/rural narratives, however, once the white youth perpetrator is removed from the community (either through an act of suicide or incarceration), it is thought that another act of violence will not occur – lightning will not strike the same place twice. This attitude is

also implied by the need to memorialize the victims of suburban/rural school shootings so that they will not be forgotten. With suburban/rural violence narratives, there is an element of “we will learn from our mistakes” that is not present in urban violence narratives where minority communities are unable or unwilling to alter their embedded “culture of violence.”

The perception of the unwillingness of urban communities to fight violence head on is strengthened through portrayals of perpetrators who are not brought to justice. The youth who kills Emilio in *Dangerous Minds*, for example, is neither caught nor tried for his crime. Whereas there are no outlaws in suburban/rural narratives of youth violence where justice reigns and the police heroically prevail, urban settings are overrun with youth criminals and murderers who are never caught. That these narratives represent a perception rather than a reality is illustrated through statistics of prison populations, which are primarily made up of minority criminals rather than white youths or adults (Grossberg 2005, Males 1996, Males 1999). Indeed, young white school shooters such as Kip Kinkel represent a version of youth celebrity that will never be attained by an individual minority gang member unless he signs a record deal or excels in sports. The spectacle of white youth violence is more of interest to the American public than the extinction of minority youths in urban ghettos; the former needs to be stopped in order to protect future citizens while the latter can continue as long as it does not negatively influence the larger white society.

Narrative Elements

While memoirs are often the medium through which urban violence narratives are portrayed (several films, for example, are based on memoirs of teachers in urban settings and *187* was written by a teacher), it may not be surprising that the mystery genre is a frequent choice for suburban/rural narratives of youth violence because of the need to understand the

incomprehensible rationales that lead to the deaths of innocent white youths and community members. Whereas some suburban/rural youth violence narratives are upfront about who the killer will be from the beginning (see, for example, Shriver 2003) several others choose to hide the killer's identity until an unveiling at the end of the narrative (see, for example, Lippman 2005). The mystery genre is a significant choice for these narratives because it allows for the possibility of innocence for the violent protagonists. In Lisa Gardner's novel *The Third Victim*, this is precisely what happens when the real killer of a school shooting incident is unveiled as "John Doe," the accomplice to the Oklahoma City bombing who was never caught, rather than the white youth who has been originally accused. The mystery genre allows for the possibility of suburban/rural violence being a mistake or misunderstanding.

The narrative elements at work in both urban and suburban/rural youth violence portrayals are among the most helpful components of this taxonomy because they point to a variety of racialized discourses at work within the narratives. For example, locating the hero/savior for each narrative clearly illustrates how whiteness is frequently privileged as a rational source of protection and healing. In the film *Dangerous Minds* (1995), for instance, white teacher Louanne Johnson is presented as more of a savior to minority youth than a black male administrator whose actions lead to the death of Emilio, a Puerto Rican student. Louanne's efforts to save Emilio, including letting him stay overnight at her home, represent her selfless sacrifice. This kind of sacrifice is also present in *Light it Up* (1999) when a white male teacher works to negotiate a safe surrender for a group of minority students to police officers that have them surrounded. Despite the death of student that occurs at the end of the film, this white teacher is still upheld by the students as a hero in the school and community.

White saviors are frequently presented in rampage shootings narratives, as well, because these narratives take place in primarily white suburban and rural settings. Often these saviors are local law enforcement who also stand-in as sources of long-term hope for the community's restoration to a sense of normalcy that was present before the act of violence took place. For example, Jodi Picoult's *19 Minutes* ends with a white female judge becoming pregnant with the child of a white police officer. This literal regeneration of the community presents a clear message about what the idealized white citizen might look like – a combination of law and authority that prevails over senseless violence. Wally Lamb's *The Hour I First Believed* (2008) also ends in a white pregnancy, illustrating the triumph of hope over adversity and a fresh start for the victims of rampage violence. The pregnant character, a victim of Columbine, states, “maybe I had to stay alive so I could have this baby” (Lamb 2008, 720), implying that pregnancy brings about a form of redemption and healing.

Lamb's text also puts forth “the milk of human kindness” (Lamb 2008, 256) as a source of hope for the white community affected by Columbine. When he explains his use of this real event in his fictional narrative, Lamb states that he “felt it was [his] responsibility to name the Columbine victims—the dead and the living—rather than blur their identities. To name the injured is to acknowledge both their suffering and their brave steps past that terrible day into meaningful lives. To name the dead is to confront the meaning of their lives and their deaths, and to acknowledge, as well, the strength and suffering of the loved ones they had to leave behind” (Lamb 2008, 726-727). Lamb's text becomes a memorial to the victims of Columbine and their families and friends – a testament to the survival of the white community that was ravaged by unexpected violence. Focusing on the good that comes out of suburban/rural

violence is one way that fictional narratives repeatedly attempt to justify white violence and the widespread trauma that it produces.

Applying the Taxonomy: Dangerous Liminalities, Constructed Criminalities

The above taxonomy categories are helpful in illustrating the broad themes that occur across genres in urban youth violence narratives and the more recent suburban/rural youth violence narratives that have emerged post-2000. However, the taxonomy is most useful when placing the disparate narratives in conversation with one another in order to locate the ways in which themes are shifted for the purpose of negotiating the relationship between racial identity, violence, youth identity, and definitions of American citizenship. I chose the following films as examples of how the taxonomy can be utilized to analyze popular narratives of youth violence for the purpose of locating the embedded anxieties concerning contemporary youths as future American citizens.

187 (1997), directed by Kevin Reynolds, tells the story of Trevor Garfield (Samuel L. Jackson), a science teacher who is attacked by a student and who eventually responds to his students' apathy and violence with his own form of justice. The film begins with Garfield riding his bike to the school where he teaches in New York. The opening scenes illustrate Garfield entering into an inner-city school – indeed, he rides from an open bridge with a shot of the Statue of Liberty in the background, to a city street with shots of garbage in the foreground. After being betrayed by a white administrator who discloses to a student that Garfield has given him a failing grade, thus sending him back to a prison program, Garfield's school becomes a place of danger and threat. Rather than the learning environment of the film's opening scene in which students and teacher laugh and smile together over a demonstration on centrifugal force, Garfield now

looks at each of the (mostly minority) students in fear. His fear is justified when he is stabbed in the back multiple times by his failing student.

Cut to “fifteen months later” and Garfield has moved to California. The American symbolism of the Statue of Liberty is replaced by a shot of the Hollywood sign. Garfield is now a substitute teacher at an inner-city school where students are “wanded” as they enter school property to check for weapons. This attempt at school safety is futile for Garfield who has already experienced a student in Brooklyn get past metal detectors with a 9-inch nail in order to enact his revenge for a failing grade. Constructed as war zones, the schools on both coasts are framed and described with war-like imagery. Students are described as going “AWOL,” Garfield has a “purple heart” because of his experience in Brooklyn, and during Garfield’s first day as a substitute, he is asked “how goes the battle?” Despite the fact that Garfield tells his students that “anyone here can be a scientist,” the rampant drug culture and gang violence make the school “a world where chaos rules” rather than the “sanctuary” that Garfield imagines it can be.

It is implied throughout the film that Garfield suffers from a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) based on his experience in Brooklyn. In his first experiences teaching in California, he has difficulty concentrating, visibly trembles, and has blurred vision. He also frequently uses an inhaler when he appears to be agitated. Surrounded by apathetic students who repeatedly threaten him and the other teachers, Garfield turns to violence, explaining to another teacher that “we can’t expect the system to protect us.” Killing one student, Benny, who is a gang member and murderer and drugging another student, Caesar, to remove his “trigger finger,” Garfield crosses over from victim to perpetrator. His actions are to protect himself, but also to protect the one white female teacher, Ellen Henry, with whom he has started a romantic

relationship. Benny threatened to hurt her and Caesar killed her dog. Garfield also justifies his mutilation of Caesar by explaining to Ellen that the student abuses his mother.

One ray of hope throughout the film is Rita, a Chicana student who Garfield tutors in writing. Formerly abused by another teacher who had sex with her, Rita assumes that Garfield wants the same; at his house for a tutoring session, she removes her clothing automatically when he leaves the room to get her something to drink. Despite his violent acts against students, in scenes with female characters in the film, Garfield is represented as a gentleman who is just trying to protect a world where “everybody live[s] by the same standard [Garfield does],” where order wins over chaos, and where righteousness is rewarded. As he helps Rita with an essay to be read at graduation, “My Way Out,” Garfield is upset to learn that she has stopped coming to school. When he visits her house, she explains, “this school shit’s for other kids, not me.” When Garfield is questioned by the principal based on the community’s accusations of his conduct (both rumors of his violent acts and his choice to tutor Rita in his home), he is fired from his position. Another teacher’s comment, that “the system failed him,” is broadly applicable to Garfield, Rita who was sexually abused by her teacher, and Garfield’s students who struggle to read and who attend class wearing ankle bracelets and who are high on drugs.

After facing rejection from both the school’s administration and from Ellen, who is horrified to discover Garfield’s involvement in Benny’s death and Caesar’s lost finger, Garfield goes home to wait for Caesar to come and kill him. Drunk and high on drugs, Caesar chooses to play Russian Roulette with Garfield, based on a scene he watches in *The Deer Hunter*. Another reference to the effects of the “war zone” that Garfield and his students encounter everyday, this game becomes a test of masculinity with Garfield asking, after taking the first shot, “that man enough for you, Caesar? That make me a man?” and challenging Caesar when he is “not man

enough to play [his] own game.” When Garfield yells that “macho is bullshit!” and Caesar replies, “it’s all I got,” Garfield mocks him when he says, “so now you’re the victim? Let me take your turn for you,” killing himself with a shot to the head. Unable to take this sacrifice as a gift, Caesar takes one more turn, killing himself as well and leaving his friend to ask, “what’s the fucking point?” Through this powerful scene, youthful nihilism is portrayed as a central theme of the film that spreads to Garfield when the system that he once trusted fails him and his students.

In one of the final scenes of the film, Rita reads about her “way out” at graduation, implying a form of agency for her character. This agency is echoed in the scene where Ellen removes her framed teaching credential from the wall and throws it away, walking out of her classroom. These actions, however, are disrupted by a shot of Garfield and Caesar, dead and naked in the morgue. Thus, the violence of the film is ultimately pointless and there is no lasting institutional or community response. Regarding *187*, and other urban education youth violence films, Henry Giroux argues that “films like *187* carry the logic of racial stereotyping to a new level and represent one of the most egregious examples of how popular cultural texts can be used to demonize black and Latino youth while reproducing a consensus of common sense that legitimates racist policies of either containment or abandonment in the inner cities” (Giroux 2000, 77). Indeed, with both Ellen and Rita, the only true innocents of the film, escaping the school, the legitimization of abandonment is complete.

187 is just one example of an urban education narrative that features youth violence and that meets the criteria outlined in the taxonomy above. The minority students—especially the male students—are constructed as criminals with no possibility of rehabilitation. This stereotype is portrayed through characters like Benny who arrives in class under a house arrest order,

antagonizes Garfield, and requests to just be written up and sent to the office. Caesar, who is unable to read a passage from the school's science book, expresses similar apathy, frustration, and violent anger when Garfield attempts to include him in classroom activities. The token smart student, Rita, is teased with the name "school girl" and repeatedly denies her intelligence and her interest in academics when she is around other students. These images of minority students "suggest that urban kids who are black, brown, and poor are not simply dangerous and pathological but disposable" (Giroux 2000, 74).

As the film defines the minority students' scholastic success and social progress in direct relationship to their racial identity, it refuses to "acknowledge the degree to which particular representations of whiteness [guide] the assumptions of successful and productive citizenship" (Shore 2007, 62). Successful students who identify in non-dominant racial, gender, or class groups are "rarely acknowledged as anything other than an accumulation of learned rather than owned behaviors" and are thus "always suspect, always open to challenge" (Shore 2007, 72). These racial differentiations among students further harmful binaries about who can be productive citizens, thus providing hope and optimism, and who will represent a threat to national economic and political success. Undeniably, "inciting fears about the 'racial other' plays a significant role" (Apple 2007, 222) in constructions of the purpose of public education and the kinds of citizens that public education can produce.

In contrast to the disposability of minority students in narratives such as *187*, in suburban/rural education films that center on youth violence the mostly white students, represented as both innocent and on the cusp of adulthood (and, therefore, great things) must be protected at all costs. Whereas minority students are constructed as criminals who will be dependent on the system (most likely in prison), white students are constructed as the hope for

the future as they are turning into productive American citizens. This theme is evident in Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), which portrays white students as responsible youths with lives of purpose and agency. Significantly, *Elephant*, which premiered at the Cannes film festival in 2003, received both the Best Director and the Golden Palm awards, top honors for the festival.

Elephant (2003) opens with a powerful scene of the liminality of youth, emphasizing the assumption that white youth will emerge as responsible adults. A camera, shooting from above, follows an old, used car weaving down a suburban street, grass on one side, parked cars on the other. The pre-dawn setting implies an intoxicated teenager trying to make it home after a night of revelry. But this is not an urban education narrative such as *187*, where it is typical for wasted students to come to class ready to antagonize their teacher. After crashing into one of the parked cars, the camera shifts to the driver, an older white man, and his bleached blond teenage son, John, who is attempting to have his father stop the car. One of the first lines of dialogue in the film is "What are you doing?" The "adult" in this situation is called into question due to his irresponsibility while his son takes on a parenting role when he forces his father out of the car and takes the wheel himself. As one reviewer of this film notes, "this child is definitely father to the man" (Groen 2003, R1). Rather than respond to his son's questions and his repeated requests to exit the car, the father instead tells his son "let's go hunting," an ominous foreshadowing to the later rampage shooting in the film.

This scene illustrates the between-space that John inhabits as a youth that is somewhere in the midst of childhood innocence and adult responsibility, both socially constructed roles. In a film that centers on the possibility of the violence and unruliness of white youth, this opening scene is evidence that even youth with troubled homes can become responsible citizens. Alcoholic parents, for example, are not justification for rejecting "the reproduction of a particular

social order” (Acland 2000, 48). Indeed, for the rest of the film, white youths are shown walking around their high school campus independently and without adult supervision. Students participate in extracurricular activities such as sports and photography without adults to guide them and often wander the halls by themselves, interacting with their peers as they happen across one another. White students are shown making their own choices, for good and for bad, as they choose to leave campus, engage in bulimia, and order weapons off of the Internet. These actions, however, are not represented as irresponsible, but are instead the opposite, giving the white youths a sense of agency as they live their almost-adult lives.

It is this independence that gives Alex, one of the school shooting perpetrators, the opportunity to “case” the school, taking notes about the cafeteria as he goes to eat lunch with other students. Scenes with adult surveillance, such as a classroom scene where Alex is pelted with spitballs by his peers while the teacher remains oblivious, represent adults as clueless to youth culture and youth experience. This understanding of adults is furthered by a conversation between three white girls who complain about their parents going through their rooms as they sleep. These actions are considered annoying by the girls and are illustrated to be purposeless when the camera then follows the girls into the restroom where they vomit their lunches into the toilet. The girls’ parents and the school administration are represented as completely unaware of their bulimia. Later scenes in the film with Alex’s parents are shot with angles that leave the adults faceless and anonymous; the viewer is not meant to care about these characters or focus on them for long. The white youths in the film are the center of their own universes and refuse adult intervention in their lives.

The one scene of the film with adult-youth interaction that is represented as respectful is framed through a gay/straight alliance meeting where white youths talk with a black male adult

about how to tell if someone is gay. This conversation, which ranges from discussions of how people dress to their mannerisms, seems to imply a similar question of how one can tell if a youth is a killer or not. This scene, where students sit in a circle and engage with their teacher as a peer, is atypical for a high school classroom setting in which teachers represent authority figures. The students in this scene facilitate the conversation with only small additions from the adult in the room. As well, when the shooting in the school begins, it is not the adult teacher who takes control of this classroom, but a white male student who goes to the door to check on the noises, only to be shot in the chest. Like other scenes in the film that center on white male students roaming the halls (this happens at least three different times, not including the film's focus on the killers when they enter the school), this classroom scene places white male youths in positions of authority and power.

Gus Van Sant's choice to not justify or explain the killers' actions throughout the film—only brief scenes of bullying are shown, for example, and they also include students that are victims of the rampage violence in addition to the killers themselves—points to a desire to allow white youth violence to remain a mystery. While some reviewers praise Van Sant for his decision to make the film's central message: “Nazi, queer, gameboy: It doesn't matter what a killer is, only that he has killed” (Morris 2003, C1), this choice causes frustration for many reviewers who call the film “infuriating” and “empty” (Bernard 2003, 54). One reviewer states, for example, that “*Elephant* does not forward our understanding of the forces of human nature that lead to a Columbine. Instead, it thrusts us into the same state of disbelief and horror we felt watching the TV coverage of the real event. That is something -- but it is not enough at this point” (Kirkland 2003, E4). The “reality” of suburban/rural violence presented by Van Sant, one of ambiguity and senselessness, is not fully appreciated or accepted by reviewers.

Significantly, this need for explanation and a sense of closure is not present in reviews of *187*, which instead focus on how the film offers a reality of urban education that audiences need to see. Indeed, one reviewer claims, “the movie deserves credit for the unsparing realism with which it shows what passes for education in so many inner-city classrooms” (Ryan 1997, D4). Another reviewer calls *187* “another valiant attempt to deal with a collapsing educational system and send a warning shot across the bows of public opinion. It's a world we have seen before, but it has never been portrayed in such a realistically harrowing fashion as in *187*” (Stone 1997, C4). Interestingly, these claims to realism are made despite the film’s surreal scenes of a teacher shooting a student with an arrow and then removing his finger and a teacher shooting up a rodent with morphine as a science lesson. Surely these are not the “realities” of urban education, but they are represented as such through the reviewers’ understanding of urban life as foreign and as a completely different world than suburban/rural public education where these actions would never be defined as reality.

This foreign world is represented in *Elephant* by the African-American character of “Benny” the only new character that we are introduced to after the rampage violence has begun. Other white youth characters in the film have background stories, relationships to other youths, and families with whom they are connected. Benny, however, is isolated when he is shown walking down the hallway toward the sound of gunshots, moving in the opposite direction of students who are running toward safety. Benny is portrayed as drawn toward the violence, rather than away from it, and even when given a chance to escape through a window, chooses to stay within the school. Reviewers refer to Benny, when he is mentioned at all, as “John Wayne” (Rickey 2003, W8) and “the sacrificial black man” (Mitchell 2003, 1) because of his choice to walk up to the killer—maybe in an attempt to disarm him, maybe out of curiosity, the audience

cannot be sure—and be killed rather than to escape to safety when he has the chance. Benny's character, one of two African-Americans in the film, and the only representation of a minority youth, fulfills the stereotypes of urban violence despite his location in a suburban/rural youth violence film when he is drawn to the violence from white his white peers flee. The message is clear: Benny does not belong here and is merely a foil for white youth innocence, rationality, and responsibility through his irrational actions.

The irrationality of the killers' actions in the film is given some surface-level justification, but just enough to confuse audiences. For example, the killers are shown playing first-person shooter videogames, watching a Nazi documentary on the television, being bullied by classmates, and kissing one another in the shower. Hints are also offered that at least one of the killers may struggle with mental illness. Several of the stereotypes of white youth violence compete against each other throughout *Elephant*, offering no answer to the question of “why?” Indeed, one of the killers, Alex, is shown playing classical music on the piano while his friend, Eric, the other killer, shoots people on a computer game. This contrast of beauty versus death begs the question of what has made the youths choose one over the other when they are capable of both? One review of the film notes that because of Van Sant's method of following a variety of teenagers throughout the film “one gets the feeling that any of those teenagers could pull a trigger, for reasons so personal to them that nobody would understand” (Persall 2003, E1). This message is echoed at the end of the film when Eric states, while in the process of killing the school principal, “you know there's others like us out there too.”

Even with this hint of other murderous youths in the shadows, and however much ambivalence Van Sant offers through his film, one message remains clear, white youth who kill are not the norm. We may not have been given a justification in this particular film, but the

many explanations for youth violence have been presented throughout the narrative and all of them are represented as being preventable. Bullying, violent videogames and television, the availability of guns online, and mental illness among youth are all manageable problems that are not tied to whiteness or white youth specifically, but are outside influences that have *created* white youth violence. This message is emphasized by the innocent white youth in the film who deal with alcoholic parents, bullying, eating disorders, and other youth concerns without acting out against their peers. Whereas urban youth violence is an *inherent* character trait, waiting to be released, the white youth violence of *Elephant* and other suburban/rural youth violence narratives is a unique combination of factors that influence white youth to do what they otherwise would never attempt.

Suburban/Rural Narratives and American Youth Citizenship Identity

This chapter began with a discussion of how constructed narratives of adolescence contribute to and influence adult perceptions of the “realities” of American youth experience and the future of American youth as productive citizens. I argued that connections made between racial identity and violence in media depictions and popular culture representations of deviant youths resulted in a “moral panic” concerning the citizenship identities of white youths and, in particular, white male youths. Moreover, I pointed to the ways in which “realities” of urban youth experience are constructed to justify the disposability of youth of color. In order to further examine the embedded anxieties within narratives of youth violence, I presented a comparative taxonomy to both categorize and analyze common themes across narrative genres and popular culture modes located within particular time periods. Using this taxonomy I argued that the various issues that are presented across fictional narratives of school violence invoke adult concerns regarding the relationship between citizenship, youth identity, and intersections of race

and gender. Through an analysis of the films *187* and *Elephant* I utilized the taxonomy to illustrate how urban school violence is frequently normalized, while suburban/rural school violence is explained away through various mechanisms and discourses that maintain hegemonies of white supremacy and patriarchy.

Film theorist Peter Wollen claims, “the cinema cannot show truth, or reveal it, because the truth is not out there in the real world, waiting to be photographed. What the cinema can do is produce meanings, and meanings can only be plotted, not in relation to some abstract yardstick or criterion of truth, but in relation to other meanings” (Wollen 2004, 532). The relationship between urban youth violence narratives and suburban/rural youth violence narratives illustrates that the latter narratives do not choose to offer separate or competing messages, but instead continue to maintain and strengthen the messages of selective and segregated citizenship that urban youth violence narratives first introduced. In the suburban/rural youth violence narratives of this chapter and throughout the rest of this dissertation, “othered” identities are often central to the definitions of white male youth citizenship that are presented. Indeed, explorations of how various identities and lived experiences are undermined through fictionalizations of the “realities” of youth violence illustrate Toni Morrison’s argument that “as in virtually all of this nation’s great debates, nonwhites and women figure powerfully, although their presence may be disguised, denied, or obliterated” (Morrison 1992, xix).

Feminist scholars such as Julia Preece have noted the consequences of citizenship defined through discriminatory practices. In her article “Feminist Perspectives on the Learning of Citizenship and Governance,” Preece argues that “the way men and women learn what is valued in terms of active citizenship and participation in decision making determines their identity as citizens, their perceived entitlements as members of a given society and their perceived role

within society” (Preece 2002, 21). She further argues that women’s limited education regarding citizenship can influence women’s political participation “in terms of representation, voice and methodology, and what kinds of space women are given in which to act as individual or collective citizens” (Preece 2002, 24). These concerns also apply to the exclusionary practices used against people of color and other marginalized citizens in the U.S. It is precisely because representations of youth citizenship in suburban/rural youth violence narratives act as a form of “public pedagogy” that excavating the narratives’ messages regarding youth citizenship is crucial to a feminist understanding of how future American citizens (i.e. white males) are being framed in particular ways that are exclusionary to various populations of youth.

Education scholars such as Anne Smith (2007) claim that American youth cannot be generalized into one group or “fixed” to meet social standards, but must instead be recognized as valuable, individual social actors. Relying on feminist arguments regarding women’s personhood, citizenship status, and humanity, Smith offers similar statements that attempt to reinstate youth autonomy and independence apart from parents and teachers. Smith argues that because youth are not recognized as citizens, often their best interest is not taken into account in the policy arena or in the classroom. By re-contextualizing representation of youth citizenship as politically, socially, historically, and economically situated, this dissertation will further examine the embedded anxieties surrounding American youth and the ways in which popular culture narratives attempt to respond to these concerns while also refusing to identify or acknowledge problematic citizenship definitions and constructions.

Using this chapter as a foundation, the remainder of this dissertation will focus primarily on suburban/rural youth violence narratives and their construction of particular messages regarding white, male citizenship. The next chapter will focus on the ways in which female

youth shooters that are presented in suburban/rural narratives are constructed in particular ways regarding their gender roles as future female citizens, their (deviant) sexualities, and their relationships to white males. In an attempt understand the relationship between social anxieties surrounding the sexual choices of white youths and their developing adult sexual identities, Chapter Two will explore how pregnancy narratives are often intertwined with storylines of female shooters in suburban/rural youth violence narratives in ways that serve to strengthen hegemonic understandings of white youths as future American citizens.

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